2 The theory of valence politics

In *Political Choice in Britain* (Clarke *et al.*, 2004b) we examined several rival models of electoral participation and party choice. One model involved the role of social class given its historic prominence in academic accounts of electoral behaviour in Britain (e.g. Butler and Stokes, 1969; Heath *et al.*, 1985; Pulzer, 1968). However, analyses revealed that social class now plays a relatively minor role in explaining party choice and, at least since the 1960s, the effects of class have been smaller than commonly assumed. The really powerful explanations of party choice are found in voter attitudes related to choice-based models of individual decision-making that see voters as active participants in a complex, dynamic and uncertain political process. These models contrast sharply with sociological accounts in which socio-economic forces and early socialization experiences drive people's political attitudes and behaviour.

Choice-based models of electoral behaviour are strongly informed by spatial and valence theories of political choice. The former theory has its origins in the work of Harold Hotelling (1929) and Duncan Black (1948, 1958), but was developed and popularized by Anthony Downs (1957). The latter theory derives from a seminal article by Donald Stokes (1963) which set out a comprehensive critique of spatial models. Spatial and valence models are closely related to each other, although this has not been fully recognized in the literature. This is partly because spatial models have received an enormous amount of attention from political scientists compared with valence models – their main theoretical rival.

Stated informally, spatial theory asserts that people vote for the party with which they *most* agree on the issues of the day. Issues that matter are ones on which voters have differing opinions, i.e. the issues have a 'pro–con' quality that divides the electorate. Taxation is the archetypal spatial issue, since some voters prefer to pay lower taxes even if this means cuts in public services, whereas others are

willing to accept higher taxes if that produces better public services. Since the political parties take differing stances on what constitutes an optimal mix of taxation and public spending, the tax–spend trade-off is a classic spatial issue. In contrast, valence theory asserts that people support the party best able to deliver on issues they care about and, crucially, these are issues over which there is virtually no disagreement. Everyone has the same preference. The economy is a classic valence issue since the great majority of people prefer prosperity to stagnation, and so they will support the party which they think can best deliver economic 'good times'. Low rates of inflation and unemployment coupled with robust growth constitutes a consensually winning combination.

The empirical evidence both in our earlier book (2004b) and in the present one shows that most voters focus their attention on how competing parties (will) handle valence issues. These performance evaluations are a crucial component of a more general 'valence politics' model that does a better job of explaining electoral behaviour than does a standard Downsian spatial model. The aim of this chapter is to understand why this is the case, as well as to examine theoretical linkages between spatial and valence models. By way of overview, our explanation of the power of the valence model is based on two broad propositions. The first proposition is that, in the complex and uncertain world of electoral politics, the requirements for reasoned choices set for voters by the valence model are much easier to meet than those imposed by the spatial model. As a result, voters find making choices using valence considerations attractive. The second is that the valence model makes it much harder for politicians (wittingly or unwittingly) to manipulate and mislead voters. Stated simply, the valence model dominates the spatial model because it facilitates reliable political choices.

This chapter begins with an exposition of the classic Downsian spatial model and some of its variants. Next, we offer a critique of these models and why the valence model is an attractive alternative. We then discuss the theoretical origins of valence reasoning and explain why voters are likely to rely on this model in the real world of electoral politics.

The spatial model of electoral competition

Downs' spatial model is rooted in neo-classical economics and assumes that individuals seek to maximize their utility when they vote for a

political party or candidate. According to the theory, people vote for the party that they think will provide the highest utility income during the post-election period. It is a theory of prospective evaluations of political party aims. Using Downs' notation (1957: 39), the model can be written as follows:

If $E(U^A t+1) - E(U^B t+1) > 0$ then voter i chooses party A

If $E(U^A t+1) - E(U^B t+1) < 0$ then voter i chooses party B

If $E(U^A t+1) - E(U^B t+1) = 0$ then voter i abstains

where: $E(U^A t+1)$ is the expected utility which voter i obtains from supporting party A, the incumbent party of government, during the post-election period $t+1$. $E(U^B t+1)$ is the expected utility from supporting competing party B. As Downs argues: 'the difference between these two expected utility incomes is the citizen's expected party differential. If it is positive, he votes for the incumbents; if it is negative, he votes for the opposition; if it is zero, he abstains' (1957: 39).

Thus, the theory offers an explanation of both electoral turnout and party choice. But, there is more. The theory provides an analysis of the dynamics of both voting and party competition. The simplest case is two-party competition in a one-dimensional issue space, which is commonly defined as the left–right continuum of electoral politics as it developed in many twentieth-century Western democracies. The core idea is that both voters and parties are distributed along this left–right dimension, and that voters will choose the party which is closest to them in the space. Thus:

$$E(U^A t+1) = -[V_i - P_A]^2$$

where: V_i is voter i's preferred position on the left–right scale; P_A is party A's position on the left–right scale.

Given this,

if $-[V_i - P_A]^2 < -[V_i - P_B]^2$ then voter i chooses party A

if $-[V_i - P_A]^2 > -[V_i - P_B]^2$ then voter i chooses party B

if $-[V_i - P_A]^2 = -[V_i - P_B]^2$ then voter i abstains

If the distribution of voters along the left–right scale corresponds to a normal or other 'single-peaked' distribution, then the model produces an equilibrium outcome in which both parties converge to the median

position on the scale. This is the well-known median voter theorem (Hotelling, 1929). Downs explains why this equilibrium occurs with an example in which the left–right dimension is measured along a 100-point scale:

> If we place parties A and B initially at 25 and 75, they will converge rapidly upon the center. The possible loss of extremists will not deter their movement toward each other, because there are so few voters to be lost at the margins compared with the number to be gained in the middle. (1957: 118)

The loss of voters at the margins assumes extremist parties will enter the electoral arena and attract those voters. Absent such entry, the logic of utility maximization indicates that mainstream parties converging to the centre of the ideological continuum will retain the support of voters they leave behind.

As Stokes (1963) notes in his critique of the spatial model, it requires a number of underlying assumptions. They are:

Unidimensionality: electoral competition takes place on a single 'left–right' dimension (or at least a very small number of independent dimensions).

Fixed structure: the dimensions are fixed and parties will manoeuvre along them seeking to maximize votes.

Ordered structure: the dimension is ordered from low to high values, and voters and parties are located at various points along this dimension.

Common reference: the issue space is the same for parties as it is for voters. When parties take a position on an issue, the voters understand what it means and are able to compare it with their own views.

One may add another important assumption which Stokes took for granted:

Vote-maximizing parties and candidates: political parties and candidates are solely interested in winning elections, and they adopt policy positions to achieve this goal.

The spatial model has generated a great deal of theoretical analysis and a more limited, but still substantial, body of empirical research. The theoretical work has focused on elaborating the model by extending

it in various ways to include multiple parties, to allow for probabilistic voting, and by relaxing the various assumptions (see, for example, Banks *et al.*, 2002; Calvert, 1985; Enelow and Hinich, 1984; Hinich, 1977; Kollman *et al.*, 1992; Mueller, 2003; Wittman, 1973). Empirical analyses have focused on testing different versions of the spatial model (e.g. Adams *et al.*, 2005; McKelvey and Ordeshook, 1990; Merrill and Grofman, 1999), or assessing whether the model can explain government policy making (Denzau and Grier, 1984; Pommerehne and Frey, 1976).

Criticisms of the spatial model

There have been two types of criticisms of the spatial model. One takes issue with specific aspects of the model, while retaining the basic framework, whereas the other rejects it completely. The first type of criticism really amounts to changing one or more of the assumptions and then working out what this means for the predictions. These might be described as incremental adjustments to the model designed to enhance its explanatory power by making it more realistic. The second is more radical and fundamentally challenges the model's core assumptions. This is the approach taken by Stokes (1963).

Considering incremental changes first, one approach has been to question the assumption that parties are only interested in winning elections and not in developing policies which reflect their own values. Wittman (1973, 1977) suggests that parties will pursue their own policy agendas as well as pursuing office, and he modifies the model accordingly. Kollman *et al.* (1992) propose that ideological considerations enter into party electoral strategies. Also, since parties have imperfect knowledge of voter preferences, their pursuit of the median voter is rather difficult. Glazer and Lohman (1999) contend that parties and candidates have their own preferences and use these to make public commitments to specific policies before the election takes place. This reduces the complexities of party strategy by placing some issues off-limits, since they have already been decided before electoral competition takes place. These various modifications change aspects of the Downsian model, but none of them eliminates the equilibrium results. However, they do make achieving equilibrium a more complex task.

Directional models of party competition represent a rather more significant change to the spatial model. In the Matthews (1979)

work, voters choose among parties on the basis of direction in an issue space, rather than because of proximity. A party can move away from the status quo in one of two directions, and it is the movement which counts rather than the distance covered. This approach is justified on the grounds that it is much easier to judge whether a party moves from the status quo, thereby signalling a policy change, than it is to judge how far it moves. Thus, in a one-dimensional space, a party can move only to the left or the right, making the utility of the move +1 for voters who agree with the change, and –1 for voters who disagree with it. In a two-dimensional policy space, the calculation is more complicated, but again the direction of movement is what counts. This implies that voters might choose a party which is further away from them in the issue space compared with a rival, just because their chosen party is on *their* side of the issue when the rival is not.

Grofman (1985) makes two modifications to the original spatial model. He introduces the idea that voters discount party positions, since they are well aware that candidates do not always deliver fully on their promises. Promise does not equal performance. Second, like Matthews, Grofman argues that voters locate parties in relation to the status quo, rather than in relation to the distance along the left–right dimension. Since voters are not sure that parties will actually move to their declared location in the policy space when it comes to actually delivering on policies, the outcomes change. Discounting any movements announced by a party implies that electors assume that the party will travel only part of the way to its announced location. This change means that parties will not necessarily converge to the median.

The Rabinowitz and Macdonald model (1989; see also Macdonald and Rabinowitz, 1998) also relies on directional considerations. In their approach, both the direction and the distance between parties and voters in the space matter. The model assumes that most voters have a rather general preference in relation to specific issues, so that they support or oppose a policy change. At the same time, voters vary in the intensity with which they hold these preferences. Voters prefer the party which is closest in the issue space and, in this respect, their model is the same as the Downsian model. However, for Rabinowitz and Macdonald, direction also matters – voters prefer parties on the same side of the issue as themselves to parties on the opposite side of the issue. Voter utilities are a combination

of both the intensity and direction of party positions in the space. Thus, when voters compare two parties, they will opt for one which is on the same side of the issue as themselves, even though it may be much further away from their own ideal point than a rival party. Direction trumps proximity. When two parties are on the same side of the issue as they are, then they will choose the one which is closest. A third possibility is that the two parties are on the same side as a voter and the same distance away. In this case, the voter will choose the party which is more intense in its preferences. So, in a Rabinowitz and Macdonald world, parties can take extremist positions and win public support.

Merrill and Grofman (1999) present what they describe as a unified model. This model combines both proximity and directional components. Voters use proximity to judge some parties while at the same time using direction to judge others, and a combination of the two for yet other parties. Merrill and Grofman hypothesize that voters are likely to judge incumbent parties using proximity considerations while judging opposition parties, which lack a track record in office, by means of directional considerations (Merrill and Grofman 1999: 41).

As this brief review suggests, there is a rich set of variations on the basic Downsian model, all of which represent incremental modifications to the original analysis. Voters remain distributed in an issue space, and parties compete for their voters by manoeuvring in that space. For all of these models, position issues define the relevant terrain of party competition and electoral choice.

In contrast, Stokes' critique is more radical – it calls into question not only Downs' model per se, but also the entire approach. His argument is as follows:

> The ground over which the parties contend is not a space in the sense that Main Street or a transcontinental railroad is. Treating it as if it were introduces assumptions about the unidimensionality of the space, the stability of its structure, the existence of ordered dimensions and the common frame of reference of parties and the electorate that are only poorly supported by available evidence from real political systems. (Stokes, 1963: 369–70)

Thus, Stokes criticizes all four of the assumptions discussed earlier, and finds them all wanting.

Stokes rejects the uni-dimensionality assumption, arguing that, in fact, electoral competition takes place in multiple dimensions. These dimensions are largely independent of each other in the minds of voters. For example, he cites findings from the American National Election Studies (ANES) of the 1950s showing that public attitudes to welfare spending were largely independent of attitudes to foreign policy. This aspect of Stokes' analysis is supported by the work of his colleague Philip Converse whose seminal study 'The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics' (1964) demonstrated that most voters lacked coherent beliefs about political issues. He found that correlations between responses to questions in ANES panel surveys over time could be best explained by what he described as a 'black and white' model. In this model, the public is divided into two very different groups in terms of their understandings of the political world. One group understands issues and the links between different policy areas, and answers survey questions consistently and coherently over time. These voters have highly structured beliefs. The second group has no real attitudes or consistent opinions on issues and answers survey questions more or less randomly on different occasions. The beliefs of people in this second group are inchoate. Converse argued that the latter group greatly outnumbered the former one, implying that a great majority of voters cannot meaningfully locate themselves on an overarching left–right issue scale, let alone identify the location of the political parties. The implication is that parties gain little by trying to find the median position, since most voters will not recognize it or their own location in the issue space.

One possible solution to this problem is to conceptualize party competition as occurring in a multi-dimensional issue space in which all independent issues are taken into account. Given this, voters need not structure their beliefs to any extent, although they will be required to have genuine opinions. In such a world, parties would seek out the multi-dimensional median voter, depending on the distribution of electors in the space. However, this particular solution faces a formidable problem. It is extremely unlikely that the parties can find the equilibrium in such a space because the conditions for its existence are so restrictive (Plott, 1967). It is quite likely that no equilibrium exists at all, so that parties will cycle around in the issue space seeking temporary advantage over their rivals (see Mueller, 2003: 230–40; Schofield, 1978, 1985). This state of affairs then feeds back into the

electorate, since it makes it impossible for voters to determine where parties will be in the future, making the theory indeterminate.

One implication of a multi-dimensional issue space and the lack of coherent belief systems among voters is that it makes political manipulation much easier. Even in the case where voters do have well-defined preferences on specific issues, political leaders have a strong incentive to try to manipulate the political agenda, to make some issues more salient than others or to mislead voters about where they are located. This is the power of agenda-setting (McKelvey, 1976). In his discussion of political manipulation, Riker writes: 'in the long run, outcomes are the consequences not only of institutions and tastes, but also of the political skill and artistry of those who manipulate the agenda, formulate and reformulate questions, generate "fake" issues etc., in order to exploit the disequilibrium of tastes to their own advantage' (1980: 445).

Manipulation of this kind is easier if voters rely on party promises rather than party performance. In a Downsian world, it is not rational for individuals to support or oppose parties for their past performance per se since these represent 'sunk' costs, or outcomes that cannot be changed. The rational actor always looks to the future – this is where utilities come from. Rational voters have no interest in 'rewarding' or 'punishing' any party or politician for what they did in the past. The only use for retrospective judgments is as a guide to making prospective evaluations, i.e. to forming expectations about what will happen in the future.

This is a rather weak justification since retrospections only provide a reliable guide when things do not change, or changes can be forecast with considerable accuracy. However, in a world of strategically pervasive manipulation and large-scale uncertainty, things change all the time – often in difficult-to-forecast ways. When the future is difficult to forecast and politicians have incentives to prevaricate, political choice is difficult. This line of reasoning suggests why voters rely heavily on the cues provided by leader images and partisan attachments – a topic to which we return below.

The second assumption challenged by Stokes is that party competition takes place in a fixed space, with voters being anchored as parties manoeuvre for electoral advantage. This assumption has its origins in economic theory where consumer preferences are assumed to be exogenously determined, i.e. outside the scope of the theory

(Koutsoyiannis, 1975). However, a good deal of electoral competition involves parties trying to impose a preferred structure on the electoral contest, by framing choices in ways that work to their advantage. This is another aspect of political manipulation and has been described by Budge and Farlie (1977; see also Clarke *et al.*, 1992; Kiewiet, 1983) as the 'issue-salience' or 'issue-priority' model of party competition. In this analysis, the issue space itself is contested as parties try to impose their own definitions of what is important on the electorate. As Budge and Farlie explain:

> How do parties approach voters? A common view is that they stage a 'great debate' in which government spokesmen defend their programmes on the important questions of the day, while the opposition criticise[s] them and argues that its own preferred policies are better. The actual evidence offers only limited endorsement for this view. Far from discussing details of their opponent's plans, parties tend in their public pronouncements to ignore them so far as possible, and to deflect popular attention to other policies which have not been mentioned by their rivals. (1977: 23)

Experimental studies indicate that parties' efforts to frame political debate are sensible – framing effects exert a powerful influence on decision-making in all types of choice situations (Kahneman and Tversky, 2000). There is a considerable amount of evidence indicating that the major British political parties design their campaigns with a close eye to the power of framing effects. For example, as discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, during the 2005 election campaign Labour concentrated on the economy, while the Conservatives emphasized crime, asylum seekers and security-related issues (see also Whiteley *et al.*, 2005). If this is how electoral competition operates in practice, then the idea of a shared issue space becomes problematic. Rather than comparing parties on the same issues, voters are being asked to judge them on different ones.

Stokes' challenge to the third assumption of spatial modelling – that an ordered distribution of opinion exists in relation to issues – gives rise to the valence model of party competition. In developing his argument, Stokes cites the example of the issue of corruption in the 1952 American presidential election – 'if we are to speak of a dimension at all, both parties and all voters were located at a single point – the position of virtue in government' (1963: 372). Valence issues, ones about which there is a wide consensus about what is desirable,

challenge the idea that electors and therefore parties are *distributed* within a policy space. Clearly, if there is no spatial variation in the locations of parties and voters, then there is no spatial competition, and so for these consensus issues the spatial model actually becomes the valence model. In the world of valence politics, debate is about who is best able to deliver what everyone wants, rather than what should be delivered. 'Who can do it', not 'what should be done', is what matters.

The fourth element in Stokes' critique relates to common reference, or the idea that the policy space is the same for parties as it is for voters. He suggests that party spaces may differ from electoral spaces: 'we may, in fact, have as many perceived spaces as there are perceiving actors' (1963: 375). Thus, if the parties define the left–right dimension in terms of one set of issues and the electorate view them in terms of another, then the spaces may be non-comparable. Parties may shift to the centre on issues of concern to them, seeking to maximize support, only to find that the electorate does not recognize that any movement has taken place. This is because the voters are focusing on other issues – they are in spaces of their own.

In general, the strongest criticisms of the spatial model relate to the amount of information that electors are expected to acquire and process when they decide how to vote. The spatial model requires enormous amounts of information acquisition and processing. It requires electors to know the issue space, to understand where they and each of the parties are located, to be able to track movements by the parties, and to adjust their own electoral choices in light of these movements. In addition, the model pays little attention to uncertainty. As Grofman (1985) points out, voters should discount the utility income streams associated with each party, since they are uncertain about the likelihood of parties actually delivering on their commitments. Thus, a party which appears likely to lose an election should have its promises discounted by a large amount. Equally, a party which has shifted its policy positions recently should also be discounted by the voters, since the change adds to the uncertainty about its position in the future. If it can move once, it can move again. In addition, the possibility of political manipulation by party strategists adds further uncertainty, and requires additional information processing. A rational voter in the Downsian sense needs to take into account such manipulation when deciding which party to choose. All of these

uncertainties need to be factored into a voter's decision-making calculus and, collectively, they impose considerable information-processing costs (Conlisk, 1996). Since information processing is at the heart of the critique of the spatial model, we consider this more fully next.

Information and the spatial model

A paradox apparent in Downs' work is that it is not actually rational for electors to spend time processing information about electoral politics. Rather, it is rational for them to be ignorant and uniformed. Downs himself was aware of this paradox when he wrote: 'it seems probable that for a great many citizens in a democracy, rational behaviour excludes any investment whatever in political information' (1957: 245). This 'paradox of information' follows from the well-known 'paradox of participation'. If it is not rational to vote because an individual cannot change the outcome of an election, then it is not worth learning about the choices on offer in that election either (Whiteley, 1995). In the absence of a coherent theory of information processing, the whole spatial model collapses.

Any worthwhile theory of electoral behaviour has to take seriously the question of information costs. One approach might be to use standard microeconomic analysis. This argues that individuals should collect information up to the point that the marginal benefits of that information equal the marginal costs of collecting it (Koutsoyiannis, 1975: 373; see also Conlisk, 1996). However, this fails for two reasons. First, it is not worth incurring any costs at all if the voter cannot influence the outcome of the election, making the marginal benefits of any extra information relevant to electoral choice zero. Second, even if this were not true, the standard cost–benefit analysis cannot be applied to information processing, since no one knows the value of information until it is actually acquired. If the costs have to be incurred before the marginal benefits can be assessed, then theory is indeterminate. Thus, standard microeconomic theory is not a promising avenue for resolving these difficulties.

For this reason, psychological models of information processing in elections recently have come to the fore. Over the past decade, much work on electoral choice has been devoted to the task of understanding how voters make sense of the political world, while at the same time avoiding the high costs of information processing required by

the spatial model. Popkin (1991) was the first to introduce the idea of 'low information' rationality (see also Lupia and McCubbins, 1998). Popkin writes: 'The term low information rationality – popularly known as "gut" reasoning – best describes the kind of practical thinking about government and politics in which people actually engage' (1991: 7). He introduces the 'two-step' model of voter information processing. The first step involves electors picking up messages from party campaigns and from the media that are relevant to their voting behaviour. When doing so, they use informational shortcuts to evaluate candidates by assessing their behaviour during the election campaign, their personal characteristics, and their views on groups which the voter knows and cares about. The second stage involves electors seeking to verify these messages using a trusted source, usually an opinion leader of some type. The latter might be a personal friend, or it might be a trusted newspaper columnist or media expert (Popkin, 1991: 45–9).

Popkin cites partisanship as an example of a low-information cue. He disputes the Michigan interpretation of party identification as an affective orientation towards a political party that is acquired in early life and typically strengthens over the life-cycle (Campbell *et al.*, 1960; Converse, 1969). Rather, Popkin adopts Fiorina's (1981) interpretation of partisanship as a 'running tally' of evaluations of party performance over time. In this capacity, party identification is an information-economizing device, or a heuristic, that helps electors to judge the validity of campaign messages.

Sniderman and his colleagues also interpret partisanship as a cue or heuristic device: 'Heuristics are judgemental shortcuts, efficient ways to organize and simplify political choices, efficient in the double sense of requiring relatively little information to execute, yet yielding dependable answers even to complex problems of choice' (Sniderman *et al.*, 1991). They explore a number of different heuristics and examine interactions between them and political sophistication and prior political knowledge. For example, they suggest that relatively unsophisticated voters who lack political knowledge are likely to use an 'affect' heuristic. Such voters will decide what to do on the basis of their feelings about candidates. Which candidate they like or dislike is key. This 'affect-driven' reasoning represents a huge saving in information-processing costs (see also Marcus *et al.*, 2000; Neuman

et al., 2007). In contrast, sophisticated voters who know a lot about politics are much less likely to use affect-driven kinds of reasoning.

Regarding the prospective issue-based voting required by the spatial model, Sniderman *et al.*, (1991: 172) argue that: 'there is no evidence for this kind of voting among the poorly educated'. Rather, poorly educated voters are likely to 'decide whether the incumbent's performance is satisfactory ... If his performance is satisfactory, [they will] support him' (1991: 176). In other words, these voters rely on valence factors because they are easy to use for people who know little about politics. Lodge and his colleagues (1995) reach a similar conclusion with their 'on-line' processing model of candidate evaluations. They argue that people do not recollect the policy positions adopted by candidates in the way required by the spatial model. Rather, they keep an unconscious record – a summary running tally – of the positive and negative messages associated with candidates, and then draw on these to make a choice on polling day. This running tally remains largely in voters' unconscious memories, while the details of policy positions are forgotten. Again, a candidate's past performance dominates the decision-making process, and future promises play a relatively minor role.

It is clear that the psychological literature addresses the problem of information-processing costs by emphasizing the importance of past policy delivery, rather than issue-based prospective evaluations. This is because it is much easier to judge parties in these terms rather in relation to future policy promises. Thus, the valence model, with its emphasis on performance, deals with the costs of information processing in a way in which the spatial model does not.

Overall, the spatial model fits rather badly with the work of political psychologists on low-information rationality. The model requires a great deal of information processing, in a context where individuals have little incentive to undertake it. It also fits rather badly with the use of affect heuristics, because it emphasizes cognitive calculations as the exclusive basis of choice. Equally, it largely ignores problems of political manipulation, in particular attempts by parties to set agendas and frame issues to their own advantage. Recent research on the psychology of electoral choice thus points in the direction of the valence model as a solution to these difficulties. We develop this model more fully in the next section.

The theory of valence politics

The valence model differs from the spatial model in many respects. The valence model pays little attention to spatial distances between voters and parties, because there is little or no spatial variation in opinions on valence issues. This follows from the point made earlier that there typically are few differences among parties on policy goals when it comes to salient political issues such as the economy, healthcare, education, crime and terrorism. Similarly, when voters are asked for their views on these issues, overwhelming majorities will opt for economic prosperity, excellent public services, and national and personal security. A related difference is that political debate involving valence issues focuses on delivery – who can do the job – whereas, the Downsian version of the spatial model assumes that delivery takes place automatically and, thus, conflates promise and performance. In addition, as we have already suggested, the valence model greatly reduces information-processing costs by emphasizing past performance and cues provided by partisanship and leader images, rather than future promises. Finally, the valence model helps to reduce political manipulation, again by focusing on outcomes that are known rather than on possibly insincere promises which may not be realized.

However, there are also similarities between the spatial and valence models. In reality, all political issues have both valence and spatial aspects. For example, the divisive issue of UK membership of the European Monetary Union, at first sight, appears to be a classic spatial issue with both voters and parties being distributed along a continuum varying from outright support to outright opposition. But, it has important valence characteristics as well. Voters strongly opposed to UK membership would vote for the UK Independence party (UKIP), if they were only concerned about issue proximity, since this party takes the strongest Euro-sceptic line. However, no UKIP candidates were elected to Westminster in 2005, and so the party is never likely to deliver on the desired policy goal. If opponents of UK membership take into account the delivery aspects of the policy, which is the central concern of the valence model, then they would support the Conservatives since that party has a real prospect of delivering. When issues are looked at in this way, it is difficult to think of a spatial issue which does not have a valence component.

By the same token, valence issues frequently have a spatial dimension. We suggest that economic prosperity is a classic valence issue, but over a broad range of outcomes, economic growth can be viewed as a spatial issue. Most people would prefer positive economic growth to no growth at all, but it is not at all clear that they would prefer double-digit growth to modest growth. This is because very vigorous growth may be accompanied by negative externalities. There may be tradeoffs involving disruption of the fabric of society and damage to the environment. Taking these possibilities into account, economic growth can be viewed in spatial terms. A similar point can be made about the delivery of public services. Everyone prefers good to bad public services, but this preference is not unlimited since good services involve higher public spending and therefore higher taxes. Public-service delivery is a valence issue, since people want better services, while at the same time being a spatial issue since, arguably, good services have to be paid for with higher taxation. This means that the theory of valence politics has to take into account spatial considerations, just as the theory of spatial politics must incorporate valence considerations. It is not inevitable that a particular issue will always be framed in valence or spatial terms, either by parties or voters.

Some work has been done on incorporating valence issues into spatial models of party competition. Ansolabehere and Snyder (2000) and Schofield (2003) add valence variables to their spatial models. These take the form of measures which attach a utility premium to one candidate rather than another. If one candidate is seen as being, for example, more honest and reliable than another, this valence premium will convey an advantage. Not surprisingly, the premium can make the difference to the outcome of the election, when candidates are close together in the issue space. Yet another approach is to add extra terms to a voter's utility function which is otherwise dominated by spatial variables. These additional variables represent non-policy components (e.g. Adams *et al.*, 2005). These variables may capture the effects of valence issues or possibly 'Michigan-style' party identifications such as Adams *et al.* append to their spatial model.

These approaches face the key problem of not being able to explain the sources of valence evaluations. They are added to spatial models as an afterthought and are not integral to the theory that drives the model. Similarly, the Adams approach (2005) cannot explain the origins of non-spatial variables such as partisanship which are incorporated into

voter's utility functions. What is needed is an analysis of the sources of valence judgments that starts from first principles rather than an approach that adds valence variables to a spatial model in an ad hoc manner. We consider this possibility next.

The sources of valence judgments

The starting point of an understanding of the sources of valence judgments is to recognize that only a limited number of issues that arise in elections are actually salient to voters. At any point in time, relatively few issues really matter to the extent of influencing the voting behaviour of large numbers of people. Traditionally, in Britain and other mature democracies, this core issue agenda has been heavily biased towards domestic matters, with the economy and public services having pride of place. Recently, these concerns have been joined by (not displaced by) a set of issues involving crime, immigration and terrorism. The appeal of these several issues is understandable because they are related to risks that have personal relevance. Taken together, they tap a complex of security concerns – cultural, economic, physical and social – to which voters attach high priority.

The idea that voters confine their attention to a limited number of issues in the larger set of issues arising in an election campaign is supported by Zaller's research on public opinion (Zaller, 1992; Zaller and Feldman, 1992; see also 2000 Alvarez and Brehm, 2002; Tourangeau *et al.*, 2000). According to Zaller's receive–accept–sample model, citizens carry a limited number of 'considerations' in their minds about political issues, which they can draw on when responding to a question posed by an interviewer in a public opinion survey. There are significant variations across the electorate in the number of considerations that people carry in their heads, and also how they use them to formulate a response to survey questions. Clearly, sophisticated voters – people with a lot of political knowledge and who are engaged by the electoral process – will have more considerations in their minds than those who are ignorant and disengaged.

Exactly the same type of process is likely to be at work when people decide how to vote. They will take into account a very limited number of issues, which are not necessarily a representative sample of all the ones in play in a particular election campaign. Zaller contends that many people have highly biased issue perceptions reflecting 'top of the head' considerations relating to their recent personal experience or to stories they have picked up from the media. This type of shifting agenda is one of the reasons why there can be significant opinion dynamics during election campaigns. The sample of issue considerations is influenced by political campaigns and parties' attempts to set the electoral agenda. The influence of the limited sample of issues on voting behaviour depends on a process of averaging across the considerations that voters have in mind. If they have an ambivalent attitude to an issue, which favours some aspects of it and opposes others, then the effect will depend on the overall net balance of attitudes. For example, they may like economic growth while at the same time dislike the environmental pollution that can accompany it. The impact of the economy as an issue that affects their voting behaviour will then depend on the running tally of these considerations (see also Lodge *et al.*, 1995).

Issue sampling effectively deals with problems of multidimensionality in an issue space, but it does so in a different way from that advanced by the Downsian spatial model. In the latter, the assumption is made that individuals bundle up many issues into an overall left–right dimension, implying that voters are politically sophisticated, with high levels of political knowledge, ample information-processing capacity, and Converse-like (1964) ideologically 'constrained' belief systems. In the present analysis, the issue space is small because the number of relevant issue considerations in the minds of voters is very limited. If voters tend to focus on a limited set of security-related issues, which they believe have strong potential to impinge on their everyday lives, such as the economy, crime, public services and terrorism, and ignore the rest, this greatly simplifies their decision-making task. More abstract issues, such as UK membership of the European Monetary Union, are likely to be ignored by all but an atypical minority, because they are remote from everyday experience and their implications are difficult to fathom. In contrast, the price of goods in shops, the state of local hospitals, the quality of education received by children and the amount of crime in the neighbourhood, have an immediacy that raises the salience of issues associated with these conditions. This is an important reason why a selection of these issues regularly is at the centre of electoral politics. Voters often have first-hand experience with some of conditions associated with a number of these issues, but information provided by other sources,

such as the mass media, political parties, and friends and neighbours is also relevant.

Another way for voters to cope with the complexity of the choices they are being asked to make is to focus on the past rather than the future. This means that they will judge a governing party primarily by its record rather than by its promises. This does not eliminate prospective evaluations since opposition parties often do not have a contemporary track record in office which voters can judge. In these cases, voters will rely on promises or on proxy indicators of likely performance such as the perceived competence, responsiveness and trustworthiness of rival party leaders. In general, past performance will be preferred to future promises, because information about performance is more reliable. Despite this, voters are being asked to make judgments about the future when they cast their ballots. Downs was aware of this fact and argued that: 'it is more rational for him [the voter] to ground his voting decision on current events than purely on future ones' (1957: 40).

The focus on performance thus applies both to spatial and to valence issues. But the information-processing costs for dealing with valence issues are significantly less than for spatial issues. In both cases, voters have to decide if a party will deliver on its policy proposals. But for spatial issues, they have also to decide if a party is being honest about its objectives. Unlike the valence model where there is a consensus about goals, in the spatial model opinions about goals are distributed, perhaps widely, across the electorate. This fact creates a conflict of interest between the voters and parties, and generates incentives for the latter to dissemble about their objectives with 'cheap talk' or misleading information (Crawford and Sobel, 1982).

Parties are faced with the task of building support among a widely dispersed set of voters in the spatial model, which gives them an incentive to be ambiguous or deceptive about where they are actually located. Recent work on signalling games suggests that rational actors will ignore promises from agents who have different interests from their own (Camerer, 2003; Lupia and McCubbins, 1998). Although different interests abound in the case of spatial issues, interests are nearly all the same in the case of valence issues. This does not of course remove the incentive to mislead about future policy delivery. Parties can claim that they will fix a problem, such as unemployment or crime, without knowing how to do so, but if voters use past

performance to evaluate such claims, then they are likely to identify deception more easily.

Another way of coping with complexity has already been mentioned – the use of heuristics as informational shortcuts. Instead of using complex cognitive calculations of the issue positions of the parties, voters can use party leader images as cues, and assess leaders in terms of traits such as competence, responsiveness and trustworthiness (Clarke *et al.*, 2004a). More simply, voters can ask: 'Do I like or dislike this particular party leader?' (Brady and Sniderman, 1985; Marcus *et al.*, 2000). In a world where political stakes are high and uncertainty abounds, looking for 'a safe pair of hands' to steer the ship of state makes eminently good sense. A rather similar device is the partisanship heuristic, where voters ask: 'what does my preferred party say about this?'. A voter who identifies with a party can use this to evaluate how parties will perform in office.

Yet another device, suggested by Sniderman *et al.* (1984), is the desert heuristic which is based on responsibility attributions. If voters think that the unemployed deserve help because their situation is not of their own making, then this will make increases in unemployment benefits popular. If, on the other hand, they think that unemployment is the fault of the individuals concerned, they will see such benefits as a waste of public money. In sum, heuristics provide readily grasped tools that enable voters to simplify complex choices – choices which they would otherwise have to make when faced with a multidimensional issue environment containing strategic parties and considerable uncertainty.

Some of the literature on heuristics suggests that voters are often able to make decisions using a variety of information shortcuts that are very close to those they would make after a full analysis of all the alternatives. In this view, 'low information' rationality is almost as effective as full rationality. This idea derives from laboratory experiments in which voters appear to act as though they are well informed, even in very sparse informational environments (Lupia and McCubbins, 1998). On the other hand, there are some researchers who think that decision-making without full information will lead to greater errors and more uncertainty (Alvarez and Brehm, 2002). If so, heuristics come with a cost of increased forecast errors. However, heuristic devices do help to reconcile the gap between the information-processing costs of a fully informed choice, and the fact that many

people lack the incentive and the capacity to become adequately informed to make classically rational choices.

Conclusion: implications of the theory of valence politics

The preceding discussion has important implications for analysing electoral choice. Clearly, analyses of voting behaviour should pay attention to valence, spatial and demographic variables. The latter are included since factors like education may interact with the valence and spatial variables and mediate their effects. Valence effects are associated with issues, leadership evaluations and partisan attachments, the latter two being particularly easy heuristics to use for the politically unsophisticated and disengaged. Regarding issues, the prevalence of valence reasoning implies that voters will make retrospective evaluations rooted in the performance of governing and opposition parties in delivering on the issues which they care about. These issues will be relatively few in number and they will be about key security concerns. Some components of this valence issue agenda, such as the economy and public services, are longstanding, whereas others, such as crime, immigration and terrorism, are of more recent vintage. Occasionally, a more remote issue, such as the Iraq War, can play an important role, but again it is the valence aspects of the war that are likely to count for more than the spatial aspects. Thus, the key question is the success or failure of the war, rather than the 'for' or 'against' positions taken by the parties on the issue. If a war is judged a success, as in the case of the Falklands conflict of 1982, this will boost support for the party that took Britain to war, but if it is deemed a failure it can damage that party and its leader. An excellent recent example concerns how British public opinion on the Iraq War eroded confidence in Tony Blair. This is the subject of Chapter 4.

Although valence issues, leader images and partisanship are crucial for understanding electoral choice, spatial issues are not necessarily irrelevant. For example, in Britain there are clear differences between the major political parties on public spending and taxation. There is also the point that voters can often only evaluate opposition parties on their promises and most of these are designed to distance themselves from their rivals and consequently are often spatial in character. We might expect to see spatial reasoning play a more important role for politically sophisticated and educated voters because it is

more difficult than valence reasoning. In contrast, leader and partisan heuristics may be less important for more sophisticated voters. These hypotheses imply the existence of interaction effects in models of electoral choice. We consider this possibility in Chapter 5. Overall, however, spatial reasoning is likely to play a smaller role than valence reasoning.

Other implications arise from the discussion of electoral behaviour presented above. One is that there will be a relationship between the competitiveness of the election and the willingness of individuals to cast a ballot. This follows from the fact that opinion polls provide relatively accurate and accessible information about an election outcome. If one party is well ahead of another in the polls, this informs people that their fellow citizens have solved their decision-making problem by choosing one party rather than another. Given this, some people are likely to accept this as the majority verdict, even when they do not agree with it, and save themselves the costs of voting. This is an attractive option for less interested and motivated citizens, who might otherwise cast a ballot if the election were more competitive. The mechanism here is not that individuals believe themselves to be pivotal in a close election, but rather that the expressions of party support by their fellow citizens create a disincentive to participate if the polls give one party a big lead over another. Voters may believe that they or, better, people like them, have political influence, but that influence is not unlimited. Faced with polling evidence that the race is not competitive, voters are tempted to conclude that the election is over and the majority have spoken. If they do decide to cast a ballot, it will be because other factors, most notably a sense of civic duty, motivate their participation.

Another implication of the discussion is that voters are always likely to give priority to valence issues over spatial issues. This follows from the greater uncertainty and extra information-processing costs associated with the latter compared with the former. Longstanding incumbent parties are likely to be evaluated almost entirely on valence grounds because they have a track record which is readily apparent. Opposition parties, which have recently been in office, also will be evaluated largely by valence issues, although in their case spatial issues will play a somewhat more important role than for incumbents, because of increased uncertainty. However, if opposition parties have been out of office for a long time (perhaps forever), then in so far as

they are evaluated by issues at all, voters will be inclined to emphasize spatial issues. In such cases, valence indicators that are not based on issue perceptions such as leader images and partisanship heuristics also become attractive alternatives.

A third implication of the discussion arises when parties make very similar policy promises in their election manifestos; this implies that they are all located relatively close together in the issue space. This reduces the spatial information available for discriminating among parties, and this, in turn, will have the effect of deterring some people from turning out to vote. This would not be a problem if all parties could be judged on valence issues alone, but opposition parties which have been out of office for many years cannot be judged in this way. So, *ceteris paribus*, a paucity of spatial information, together with a lack of valence information, will tend to deter people from voting. On the other hand, a loss of both spatial and issue-based valence information will encourage individuals to use non-issue-based reasoning such as leadership and partisanship heuristics. And, these are cues that are applicable for choosing among all political parties, incumbent and opposition alike.

In retrospect, the enormous amount of attention political scientists have paid to the spatial model over the past half century is puzzling. Its mathematical tractability, enabled by a set of extremely restrictive and unrealistic assumptions, may explain its attractiveness. However, developments in the psychology of political reasoning increasingly suggest that the spatial model fails to provide an adequate general theory of voting. In reality, electoral choice is grounded mainly in valence reasoning, with spatial considerations playing a secondary role. In subsequent chapters, we examine empirical evidence for the claim that the theory of valence politics provides a parsimonious and powerful explanation of electoral choice.

3 *Valence politics and the long campaign*

Modern election campaigns are lengthy affairs. In Britain, although official general-election campaigns typically last for approximately four weeks, the continuing long-term battle for the hearts and minds of voters resumes almost as soon as an election is over. Parties manoeuvre to ensure that the issues thought to favour them are salient on the issue agenda by devising media strategies aimed at securing the best possible coverage of their policy proposals and core values. They also work assiduously to project images of their leaders as capable, responsive and trustworthy. At the same time, events and developments – policy successes and failures, domestic scandals, international crises and other exogenous shocks – occur. Voters react by making judgments about parties, candidates and leaders on a continuing basis, that is, during the official 'short' campaigns in the month preceding a general election, as discussed in Chapter 6, as well as over the course of the inter-election cycle as a whole.

In this chapter, we show how important changes in the issue agenda after the 2001 general election affected voting in 2005. Two related events had a profound impact on public opinion during this period – the September 2001 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center and the March 2003 invasion of Iraq followed by the protracted, unresolved war in that country. These events changed the valence judgments of the British electorate in two important ways. First, they led to the development of a new set of issue priorities in the minds of voters, with traditional concerns about the economy and public services being overtaken by a 'new' agenda focused on internal and external security. Second, notwithstanding Labour's ongoing success in managing the economy, the interminable, bloody conflict in Iraq damaged Prime Minister Blair's reputation as a competent and trustworthy leader. Given the importance of the leader heuristic as a source of voters' valence judgments about parties, the damage inflicted on Blair's